

[BEGIN AUDIO]

[TECHNICAL]

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** The following oral history interview was conducted on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1992 at Midway Island at approximately 10:45 AM. The interviewer is Mr. Daniel Martinez, historian for the National Parks Service. The oral history project is a cooperative effort of the United States Navy, [INDISCERNIBLE] Base, Pearl Harbor, Barber's Point Naval Air Station and the State of Hawaii Historic Preservation Division. Could you please state for me your full name?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** My name is George M. Ashton.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And your age?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I'm 72.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And your present address.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** My present address is 1732 Edwards Street, St. Paul, Minnesota.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** I'd like to take you back to your early childhood days. Did you grow up in St. Paul?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, I did. Lived there all my life.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And were born there.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I was born there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How many in your family?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I have three brothers and one sister.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Are they all still living?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No. My sister died and my three brothers still live back there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And you had your mother and father together all the time?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941 rolled around, what were you doing and do you remember that day?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, I do, very well. I was sleeping, because I was working nights and I was sleeping days. And when I got up to go to work that evening, my mother said, "George, we're at war."

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How did that affect you?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I cried. It still does.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What emotions does it strike you? Why does that emotionally move you so?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I guess I was afraid of losing friends.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Let's stop for just a second. All right, we'll continue on.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Okay, wait a minute.

[TECHNICAL]

**GEORGE ASHTON:** -- 21 then.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Isn't it amazing?

[TECHNICAL]

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Put that back here.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** All right, George, we're gonna start up.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Okay.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** I'm gonna have to go back to that question if you don't mind.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** All right.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Where were you on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I was in St. Paul, Minnesota and I was sleeping. I had been working nights so I was sleeping in the daytime. When I got up that evening, my mother told me that we were at war.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** That the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** That's right, yes.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** That strikes an emotional chord with you.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, it does.

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Why is that?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I had a lot of good friends, you know, and I was afraid that we'd lose some of them. You never know.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** These are friends you grew up with?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When enlistment came about, can you tell me how you went about enlisting?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, there were about ten of us decided that we'd go in the service. All of us had draft card notice. Not notices to go in, but we all had numbers. So we decided we'd go over into the Marine Corps. We went over, had to go to Minneapolis, Minnesota to do this. They didn't do it in St. Paul. So ten of us went over there, and out of the ten, three of us finally made it through. And it took me eight times thought. I had to go back eight times before they accepted me.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Why eight times?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I always had a temperature every time I went over there. I was too excited, I guess.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Why did you choose the Marines?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I guess we wanted to be in the best outfit that we could, you know. Being young, as long as you were going to join, we decided we'd join the Marine Corps.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** This fear you had after Pearl Harbor was these very friends you were talking about, right?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I beg your pardon?

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** These friends, after the Pearl Harbor attack, were the very friends you enlisted with?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, they were, and by the way, they all came back okay. We have serial numbers in sequence, and they all live around St. Paul.

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When you enlisted in the Marine Corps, you were sent for training. Where was your training at?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** San Diego, California.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was that like for a kid leaving St. Paul?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, the night we got off of the train, and this big sergeant came out there. Looked like he stood about eight feet tall. Put us in a truck, took us to the barracks and took all of our personal belongings, all of our money, our knives, our wrist watches, everything, and we never saw it again. We were supposed to get it back. Of course, it wasn't much money, but all the knives and that stuff, they kept. And it was sort of a terrifying experience, because being away from home for the first time, you know. The people that you went with were not your next bunk buddy. They always seemed to get separated.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How old were you then?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I was 21.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was the most interesting, or even difficult experience of boot camp?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I don't know. Boot camp was kind of tough in those days, you know. But I don't think it's really any tougher than it is now. Now you can't smoke in boot camp. We could then, and we did. But the normal everyday activity was tough. They didn't pull any punches about how much you had to do and what you should do and make sure it got done? And the physical activity out on the fields, marching and stuff like that, and running in that sand, that got to you finally.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was the most difficult that you'll remember as long as you live?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Not any one particular thing, no.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When you got your orders, where were you sent first?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I got the order to leave, I think it was the latter part of June of '42 in San Diego, and they sent us to Pearl Harbor. We did not know where we were going.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was Hawaii like?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, it was nice, although we couldn't get downtown at all. They let us out two or three times and we had to be back by 9:00. Waikiki Beach was nothing but barbed wire all over the place, and about the only street I remember there is King Street. That was the main street then. But we used to go down whenever we had a chance, but like I say, only two or three times. It was so crowded, well, you couldn't get anything. Go into bars, were closed. You'd have to stand outside the bar if you wanted to get in. When you did get in, you had to get right out.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Were you attached to a unit at that time?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No, I was not. Not really attached to a unit, but we were with the 3rd Defense battalion. That's who was there at the time. And the reason that I got to Midway was, one day they lined us all up outside, and the sergeant came down the line. He stopped right next to me and he said, "You fellahs from here on, go over this way. The other way, go the other way." They went to Guarda [ph?] Canal, and we went to Midway. They were on Midway, the 3rd Defense and they were pulling out, and the 6<sup>th</sup> Defense battalion took over the jobs over there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How did you come to Midway, by ship?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes. I don't remember the name of the ship. Wait a minute, yes. It was the USS Wright from Pearl on, but I don't know what it was from Los Angeles on.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was your first impressions of when you saw Midway from the ship?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I couldn't see it, it was so small. But it was low-lying of course, you know, and very few trees and white. Just shone like a jewel out there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And when did you arrive at Midway, what day?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** It was August 4<sup>th</sup> of 1942, in the evening. At night, we finally got off the ship, but they docked right at the dock that's still here, I think, it's the same one. One of them is, anyway. And then they took us by truck and put us on a little ship and took us over the Eastern Island.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Now were you aware of the battle that had taken place?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Oh yes, definitely. In fact, I think I was a replacement for a man that was killed on a machine gun over there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And where did they land you? What island did they land you first?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** We landed on Sand Island, but I don't remember that boat ride over to Eastern, but that's where I ended up anyway.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Tell me about landing on Eastern.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, it was evening of course, dark, and the truck pulled up to the area where I was gonna-- somebody had to get off there, and I was the one that was asked to leave the bus, or the truck. Jumped off, and a gentleman by the name of Culfus Lay [PH], who now lives in St. Louis, Missouri, told me to come with him and he put me in a dugout like thing, a big hole in the ground with sand on top of it. You know how they covered things up. And "See you in the morning." And that was the last I saw of anybody that night. I had chambered a round in my rifle and I think if anybody had come through the door, I'd have shot them. I was scared.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** So that was your first night?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah, that was my introduction to Midway.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And you were frightened.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** You bet.

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was your rank at the time you landed on--?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I was a private.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Can you describe to me some of the day to day affairs that went on here at Midway for yourself?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, there's not really too much to do, because you did the same thing every day. You'd get up, you'd have breakfast. We made our own breakfast, by the way. We had a little cafeteria lunch room style thing, short order, more or less. There was a big mess hall, but they delivered our other meals, but we had bacon and eggs and stuff like that for breakfast, and then we'd go out in working parties. We'd make concertinas, which is a roll of barbed wire wound around iron stakes and we'd put them out in the waters. Then we'd walk beach patrol, and stuff like that all day long. At the nighttime, we'd still have beach patrol, four hours on. We'd play ball once in a while and have games and stuff like that, but there wasn't really much to do until later on, they had put a movie in. Then they had a beer garden down there too, right next to it.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When you landed on Eastern Island, were you assigned immediately to a gun?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What type of gun?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** It was a 50 caliber machine gun, water cooled, and it was right on the beach. There was a parapet made out of sandbags. The gun sat in the middle, and behind that was a little opening where you could go inside and there was a bunk in there. And that was covered over with sand. Of course, the roof on was all sand, and then the door out the back end. Now I lived on that gun. I didn't live no place else until that gun was taken out of there and we put a 40 millimeter there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How long was that gun in place then?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I would say it was there for about six months in that gun.

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Did you build this emplacement?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No, it was already built. It was there during the battle.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Do you think you'll be able to find that position?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I think I can walk right up to it, or that general area, anyway.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** so that was your life, right there, for the most part.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** For part of it. Then I moved from there to a 40 millimeter gun, and after-- well, I'll take that back. We took the 50 out, put in a 40 and I stayed there for a little while. Then we brought in another 40 millimeter gun. Oh, and by the way, while that 40 millimeter gun was in there, Admiral Nimitz came over one day, to the island. Came over to Eastern Island and had me shoot at a bird out in the water, way, way in the distance. He wanted to know how that gun worked. So I asked him, "Well, what's the range?" He said, "That's your problem." And we fired off one round and didn't hit the bird, but when it went bid, that bird jumped about 16 feet in the air. He said, "That's close enough."

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** It must have been pretty interesting to have Admiral Nimitz standing right there.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I didn't even know who he was, until about two days later, somebody told me who he was. I know he was an officer, but that didn't snow me any. I mean, it didn't make any difference to me.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** So what did you think when you found out who he was?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I was kind of excited then, but then it was too late.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Were cameras allowed here at Midway?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No, you could not have a camera, but there were some, I understand.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** People took pictures, but it wasn't official.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** That's right. By the way, there was very little vegetation, you know. On that shore of the island where I was on there, there were just low scaevola



**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

bushes on one side, and then there was the power plant over there, and there was a few trees in front of that, and that was it. It was nothing like it is now. All corals, rock, sand like.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Would you typify it as relatively barren then?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, definitely.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** So if you were out there, you were relatively exposed then as well?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Mm-hmm.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Your uniforms that you were issued during that time, how did they work out here in this tropical climate?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** We didn't wear the heavy greens that Marines normally have for colder climates. We wore khaki or dungarees and they were comfortable, plenty comfortable. I used to walk beat patrol at night with a jacket on and barefooted. Sand was warm, you know, but the jacket kept you warm.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What type of firearm, rifle did you have at that time?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** We started out with 1903s and then they gave us a grand after that.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** M1s.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Mm-hmm. Along the beach, there were mines that were wired up to gun positions, in each gun position the old style hand crank job. And to set that off, all you had to do is to crank them up, you blow up all the mines along the beach, which never really happened. Only one guy, he made a mistake one time.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Tell me about that.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I wasn't there at the time, but they claim he cranked and he didn't set them all off, but he set quite a few off. Nobody got hurt though, by the way.

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** After the battle of Midway, there was always this fear that the Japanese would return. Was there any time that a submarine came in?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Oh definitely, yeah. We had sub sightings all the time.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Did you ever fire on submarines for any of that time?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I had moved to a different gun position on the end of one of the runways. One night, a sub came up out there, and all the guns on the island fired. Ours didn't because there was a friend of mine would have been directly in the line of fire. He was on a 37 millimeter gun, and I would have had to fire low, so we decided not to fire our gun, and we were the only one that didn't fire that night, on that side of the island. I think it was kind of a stupid mistake later on. They had everybody chair their guns down and clean them. Now if that had been two or three submarines out there, and they want to do some firing on the island, that would have been a perfect time. But ours, we didn't have to clean ours, but they made us stand watch.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Did you ever feel relatively isolated from the activity that was going on on the opposite island from where you were?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Absolutely, and on the same island. Actually, you were instructed to stay within the perimeter of your gun position. You could move around occasionally, but when you did get to go any place, it was usually hauling garbage, because you did duty on the garbage truck. Then you'd go and meet all the other guys.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** During that time, what kind of special activities did you and your men involve yourself in?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, we played football and a little baseball and stuff like that, but they always kept us busy. And we wrote a lot of letter, lot of letters.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Who did you write to?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I wrote to my wife, my present wife was my girlfriend then, and she sent a letter every day.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Is that right?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yep. And all those letters that I wrote her, she kept. And when we got home and we were married, there's only one letter she saved. In that letter, I promised to buy her a washing machine, and she saved that one. She threw the rest out. When I got home, she just junked them.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** In those letters, did you describe what you were doing out here?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No, no way, unless you said you were running down the island someplace. But the mail was censored, and they tried Fe-mail [ph?] for a while, but I didn't like that very well.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Can you describe to me what that is?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Fe-mail was, you could write a little letter on a piece of paper, or Fe-mail paper and it was a photograph. And it was real small and went out in a small sized envelope. It was supposed to be for speedy mailing and not take up so much room. But the censors would cut the regular letter. They'd cut lots of words out. They always did. So I don't know how they could understand. We tried to have a code so that we could tell our people back home where we were, but evidently, they didn't know how to read it or anything. But when people would go back to the States, they would call our parents and tell them where we were.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Besides the activities, sports, did any of the Hollywood personalities come out to visit you on these shows?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Joey Brown was out on Eastern Island. I didn't get to see him, but he was there. They took pictures of him and we had several senators and representatives out of Congress there, and one was from Minnesota, and I wanted to

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

get down and see him, but I couldn't get down that way. But I never saw any other actors or anything else, but there were some over in Sand Island, I believe.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** So they came out here periodically to boost morale.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah, they're boosting morale.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Unfortunately, it didn't boost your morale, because you were over in Eastern.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I know, we were on the wrong island.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Have you had a chance to look back at the spare time you had here? You had--

**GEORGE ASHTON:** A lotta time.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Lotta time, and you had some unusual things that lived here. Do you have any stories to relate to some of that?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, it's kind of hard to think of anything special. You forget what you really did all the time you were here.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How about the birds?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Oh, yeah, well there were a lot of birds, gooney birds all over the place every year, you know. What they used to call a Japanese lovebird, now they call them Hawaiian lovebirds of course. And oh, by the way, before I forget it, there's Minnesota dirt on Eastern Island and there's also Michigan dirt there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Tell me that story.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I was with a fella by the name of Adam Handy [PH] who now lives in Grand Rapids [NO SOUND] and decided to send home for some dirt. So his folks and my folks and our friends from back home sent us cigar boxes full out here. And we put it in the ground and we grew cantaloupe. They got to be about the size of tennis balls. Now I don't know where that dirt is now, but it was there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Were they tasty?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** They weren't too bad, but you know, of course we were eager to cut them and they didn't get very big.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How did you feel when you opened that box and saw a piece of home coming that way?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** That didn't bother me.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Make you feel good?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I guess so. I don't know. You kind of wonder if you'd ever get back there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Did loneliness play a large factor with you? Did the letters help?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah, they did. Hadn't been for the letters, I think it'd have been tough.

[TECHNICAL]

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When you were out here, they were certainly shoring up the defenses.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was your view by 1943 of the defenses of Midway? Were they adequate? Were they gonna serve the purpose if the Japanese returned, do you think?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I would say so. Of course, we had all of the aircraft over on Eastern Island for a while. And then Sand Island put aircraft on there. But the bombers came out and left Eastern Island to bomb Wake [PH]. And by the way, we never had any mosquitoes over there as far as I can tell, until those bombers came in and went to Wake and back, and I think the mosquitoes came on the planes. But we used to watch them take off and come back. I think the nicest-- I thought the neatest logo on any of the planes I ever saw was a guy had painted a pair of dice on the front

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

by his guns. It said on there, "Shoot, you're fated." He always came back, that guy, every time. He always made it. But they did lose a lot of planes.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** There was a lot of planes on this island. I understand you also liked looking at the P40s, because of their markings.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** They had P40s here, but they weren't here long. People don't quite believe it, but that was 1942 when those P40s were here, and there was not too many of them. I don't know how they got here, or how they left here, because they couldn't fly from here to Pearl. And they couldn't land on a carrier. But it was a type of P40 that had the shark's nose pointed on the front of it. They just came into land, they'd barrel roll the runway, all the way down, every time, never failed. They weren't there long. I don't think they were even there a week.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When you were out here in Midway, did you have any interaction with any of the Army or Navy aviators or any of the people that were stationed here?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Very little, very little.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** So your world was quite small then.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, it was. Very confining, very confining. They always told us, "Don't leave the area." It was really confining because you could get from your gun position over to another one and visit, you know, and we used to do that. But as far as getting all the way around the island, it was very difficult.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** When did you leave Midway?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I left there in March of 1944.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Had you risen in rank, or was it difficult to rise in rank?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I was a sergeant when I left. But when we got to Pearl Harbor, they took that stripe away.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** They did?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** They called it a saltwater warrant and took those stripes away.

We went back to corporal. But from then on, everybody that went to Midway Island, almost every one of them that was a sergeant when I left, they were all gunnery sergeants and master gunnery sergeants out there.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What did you do after Midway? 23.50

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I went home for a 15 day furlough, and then requested an extension. We got the 15 day extension, then I went back to San Diego-- not San Diego. I went back to Camp Pendleton at Oceanside, and I stayed at the old Raider camp, right near San Clementi [PH]. Then we shipped out of there again in September, I believe, of '44. And I went to Pearl Harbor, and while I was at Pearl Harbor, the same Culfus Lay that put me down in that dungeon, or whatever it was, when I hit Midway, met me on the street. He just came back from Saipan, and he had his couple of fingers shot off on his hand. He helped carry my sea bag over to our quarters. Well, that was the last time I saw him until about two years ago. I found out he lived in St. Louis and I called him and he didn't remember me. And I was really disappointed, and then I start telling him everything I knew about him, and he just could [BREAK IN RECORDING] until a reunion in Corpus Christi, Texas two years ago. He came down there and then we knew what was going on, then he recognized me.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** One of the things that has come up in some of the conversation is, what was food like out here? What was something you probably saw most of the time?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I didn't think the food was too bad.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Can you describe what it was like?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, for breakfast, we had fresh eggs, at least we did. We cooked them ourselves, and he had bacon or ham and toast. And for a noon lunch, they would deliver with a truck. It was tasty. I never had any complaints about the

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

food. Got turkey on Thanksgiving, that kind of stuff, you know. It was good. We sure didn't starve to death. I hear different stories from people on Sand Island and I just can't believe it. This one particular gentleman, [INDISCERNIBLE] he claims he's never had any Spam here. So the other day, we were out for breakfast and we bought him Spam.

[TECHNICAL]

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** -- Midway, you had kind of a unique story you wanted to tell me.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, I would like to tell that story.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Go right ahead.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Okay. We were headed for Midway, and this was in the latter part of July of 1942, and I was on the USS Wright. That's a transport ship. And we were out about three or four days, headed for Midway. And there's one thing when you get on a transport ship, or any other ship, and you're a Marine, there's two things the Navy does for you. They give you a mop or they put you on guard duty, on the watch. Well, I got the watch at night. So another friend of mine, we were on the fantail of the ship, which is the rear of the ship, on watch until midnight. We left our 12 [INDISCERNIBLE]. We got done with the watch and we started to walk away and I said, "Did you hear that?" He says, "What?" I says, "I heard a cry for help." He says, "By golly, I did hear something." So we walked a little farther and I said, "You know, I did hear that." So I walked back and I reported a man overboard. We walked back down the deck. We were sleeping on deck by the way. The captain, or somebody from the bridge came over the loudspeaker and said, "Will the man who reported a man overboard report to the bridge, please?" So I hotfooted it up to the bridge and walked in, and he asked me if I was a Marine or a sailor. I told him. He says, "What side of the ship?" and I told him port or starboard or whatever it was. He said, "Thank you, that's all." Went down to the deck again, and about two minutes later,



**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

the ship stopped dead in the water, they turned on a searchlight. And there on the starboard side of the ship, about six blocks away, you could see was a man bobbing up and down in the water. They lowered a boat, went out there, picked him up, brought him in. He didn't have a stitch of clothes on him. Brought him up the deck, and here, he had fallen off, or been thrown off, or jumped in off of our destroyer escort. Now they took him in, and the last-- I heard nothing more about that. I don't know whatever happened to him. I've tried to find out through the years, but I just can't. I was asking the Navy, but I think I should have gone to the Coast Guard, because I think it was a Coast Guard boat now, where he came off of. But I don't know what happened to him, but I do understand that he was court-martialed. Now what do you think are the odds of that happening, in the middle of the night, two ships on the ocean?

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** I gotta tell you, I haven't heard that story before, or heard of a story like it before. You saved someone's life.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Maybe, maybe. Maybe he led a worse life after that though. Who knows?

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** I want to go back. One of the things that's very curious, you fellahs lived in these bunkers. Living in these bunkers, did you feel safe and secure in those things? Was there a degree of comfort in those things?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No, not in the bunker itself. See, the one things that the fellahs really were afraid of over there, a lot of them were, that the Japanese would send people ashore at night from these submarines and come and choke the guys to death. That's what they used to do in various places. They'd come with wires and choke them. I know fellahs that I visit today. By the way, whenever I visit around the United States, I was secretary of this outfit for the past five years. I'm done now. I carried rosters with me, and I would stop and talk to all these people. This one fellah

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

particularly, in Wheeling, Illinois, said that was his biggest fear, that a submarine would disgorge some Jap sailors and they'd come in and garrote him with that wire.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What was your biggest fear?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Water, a tidal wave. That was my biggest fear. In fact, one time they did give us a tidal wave warning. It came over the phone, "Take to higher ground." Well, where do you take the higher ground on an island that's a foot and a half above? Just grab your rifle and go. We never did get it. We got high water, but it didn't engulf the island by any chance.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** We've been observing the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II, and you coming back here, how has this Midway experience affected your life?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, for one thing, I've gotten a lot of friends because of it. Now Al Grin [PH] is the man who started our organization. Lives about a mile and a half from my house. And I saw the ad in the paper one day and I went down to see him. Took me about two months to find his house. He lives on a side street. But anyway, I got to see him. And since that time, we go to have a reunion once a year and we meet people that we never knew before. The first reunion I went to, I never knew a soul. But you keep finding people in there that were on the same island you were, and sooner or later, you find some that were with you. And you make a lot of new friends that way. We've had 17 reunions in a row now. I've made 15, and we have friends all over the United States now. And it's helped, it's enriched our life really. It gave us some traveling, something we might not have done. I've been retired for 12 years now, and I've never been bored yet, and traveling to these reunions is one thing.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Coming back to Midway, this is the first time back for you?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, it is.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How has it changed?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, when I walked onto Sand Island, when I finally could see it, I didn't believe it, because I didn't think that all those new buildings were her, which I call new. I never saw them before. I saw some of the other ones, but from the picture that I had from the people that I knew that were living here, were pictures of all old buildings. The new ones, it astounds me. I didn't really-- all those trees and stuff like that, that's different.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Are you disappointed?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No, not really. I think it would make a good summer resort. Take care of it, right?

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Anxious to go to Eastern Island?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yes, I am, very anxious.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What do you think you'll find there? How do you think you'll feel emotionally going back to that place?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I don't know. I can't tell you. I think I can find the spot though.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Is there a sense that maybe that's where your youth was lost?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Part of it, yeah, part of it.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** After all these years, World War II, a lot of veterans are looking back towards the former enemy and coming to grips with those feelings. What's your feelings towards the Japanese today?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I guess there's a little prejudice in everybody. Even if you say you're not prejudiced, I think you are. I have no Japanese friends, per se. I mean, very few live where I live, but I have dealt with Japanese people. I think that it doesn't really bother me too much. But I guess, like I say, there's prejudice. When I was back in Hawaii in '84, I came over here, one of the things that disappointed me more than anything else was the fact that my wife wanted a rickshaw ride, you know. I says, "Fine, when you get over there, you can get a rickshaw ride." But there was an American girl pulling that rickshaw, and I wouldn't let her ride. Absolutely, I would

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

not let her ride in that thing. I was really disappointed. I have admiration for the Japanese people in a way, for how they pulled themselves up since the war. By the way, being in the automobile industry, I should have two reasons why I should be prejudiced.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Would you like to meet with Japanese veterans, just to--?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, we were going to invite some to our reunions, but we didn't. There are several, not on Midway, but in another place, I captured a couple and I would like to meet with them, yes, but I don't know if they're alive or anything.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** You say you captured a couple. Is that a short story you can relate?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** It's not too short, but it's short enough, I guess.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Go ahead.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, after I left Midway Island, I ended up on [SOUNDS LIKE] Pelro. It was a lot [INDISCERNIBLE] between there. And I was assigned a job as driver for the generals and the admirals on the island. And one night, a guard came up to my quarters and said, "George, we have to evacuate the area. There's been a landing here," troops off the line. They were starving to death. There was really no-- they didn't come to fight I don't think. But anyway, the general staff was sleeping in an area near there, so I went up to find out if they were gone. The general was gone, but all the staff colonels and majors and everybody else were still there, so I went down and knocked on all these doors. And by the way, I didn't take a rifle with me either, and I went barefoot. I didn't want them to shoot me. But anyway, there was about seven or eight of them and I woke them all up. One guy put a 45 right between my head here when I knocked on his screen door. But we evacuated the area, and the next morning, I went back down there to pick up some stuff for my hut down there. I grabbed my rifle and I headed down the rocks, looking for some of our crew that were out there, and I ran across a cave where I looked in and I saw two

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

people sitting in there. I didn't know if they were dead or not, and one of them moved his hand a little bit. So I hollered down to this captain. I said, "Captain, there's two lives ones in here. What do you want me to do?" He said, "Shoot them," so I pulled the trigger and nothing happened. And all I heard was, "No, no, no, no, no." So I looked in again. I said, "Come on, get out of there," and they walked out of there just like that. Took them down, took their clothes away from them. The next thing I know, one guy taps me on the shoulder and he hands me a hand grenade. I didn't know if it was armed or not, but if you want to see a 100 yard pass, well you soon could have seen one that day. That thing went right out into the ocean. They were nice. We took them in and that was it.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Was that your first experience of actually seeing the enemy?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** But it was first experience of capturing them.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** That close, yeah.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** We're coming back to the end of this. Is there anything that you'd like to tell me that wasn't expressed in a question here, something that's important?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I think the whole time in the service was important to all of us that were in it. You know, the Marine Corps I think is a little different than the other services. We've got a lot of esprit de corps. I know that everybody doesn't feel that way. The two fellahs that I went into the Marine Corps with, they never think anything of being in the Marine Corps, I mean, and both of them are real successful in life, but so what? They didn't care about going different places, as a Marine Corps unit after. I don't know, when Marines get together, they're different. They stick together. I kind of enjoyed that.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** This comradeship that you and your colleagues have enjoyed is what brought you back to Midway, isn't it?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah. I'm quite surprised that there was not more people put in for this. But I think the reason being, we had a reunion in June, you know. When we had that reunion, we knew about this, but then in order to get here, you had to have been here on I think on June 4<sup>th</sup>, if I'm not mistaken. Well, then it can gel. But now when it came through again, why, after talking to Alan and a few other of the people in our outfit, they said, "Why don't you put in for it anyway?" And we did and it worked out fine, because they wanted some people that were here not during the battle but after the battle. Eighteen months in one spot, you know, that's a long time. A lot of those people that were in the battle were gone. They didn't stay here.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How do you feel about those Marines that defended this island during the Battle of Midway?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I gotta take my hats off to them. They had old airplanes, you know, and those on the ground, of course, saw only the aircraft coming in and that kind of stuff, but I think you have to really commend the pilots in that they lost a lot of airplanes going off this island. A lot of them. We have, in our organization now, a gentleman by the name of Brookes [PH] who was a pilot here. He wasn't at our last reunion, but he flew off of Eastern Island. He's one of the lucky ones.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** With your World War II experience behind you, is there any lesson of World War II that you feel is important that the nation remember?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, the question of way all the ships were in Pearl Harbor bothers everybody. I don't think that should ever happen again. But I'm still a firm believer in, you've got to be strong. I don't believe we should cut our military back to where we get to be a weak nation. I think we should keep it at status quo high, but not to look for a war, but I think we should be strong enough to protect ourself.

[TECHNICAL]

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** George, that will conclude our interview. I want to thank you for spending the time with us this morning, recalling your memories of Midway and World War II.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Okay, thank you very much.

[TECHNICAL]

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** As I was saying, there's this question of Pearl Harbor and its emotional basis stirs you. I can see that. Have you visited the Arizona memorial?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** [Nods "yes"].

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** How do you feel when you go on board that place?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Tough.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** You see those Marines on the wall, and the sailors. Do you see yourself in there?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** [Nods "yes"].

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Does the Arizona memorial mean more to you as the years go by?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, it bothers me when you see people there kind of joking about what happened.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** That is an issue that comes up. We have a lot of people born after World War II, don't have this emotional tie that you have. Part of the experience of having the memorial open is of course for people to understand what happened 50 years ago. But you don't need an explanation, do you?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** It really makes a difference, I'll tell you.

Q: If you were talking to a grandson or granddaughter and you were to put it in their language, how would you reach them in terms of what you feel?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** It's hard to do.

Q: Imagine, and answer that question too, George, as though he asked it. How would you explain it?

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I don't know how to answer, I really don't.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** If I was your grandson, and I asked you, "Why's Pearl Harbor such a big deal, Grandpa?"

**GEORGE ASHTON:** You know, it's hard to answer that question. I just can't-- one thing, it pulled the country together for a while, you know. But to have something like that happen is the biggest thing [BREAK IN RECORDING]

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** -- by our rules, was it?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** No, it was not.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** It's contrary to our culture.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yep, you're right.

Q: What part of you is still mad about it?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** I didn't understand that.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** What part of you is still angry about that?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I guess when you really look at it, you know, they took part of our life for one thing, part of our years away from us. But the fact that they could do something like that, you'd think they were barbarians, and they were, more or less, at that time, you know. And like you say, we don't live that way. It's not the honorable way to fight, I guess, is what the thing is. You don't sneak up on your neighbor.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** One historian remarked recently that--

[TECHNICAL]

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** One historian remarked recently that yesterday's sneak attack is today's preemptive strike.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Could be.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** That technology has outrun chivalry.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Mm, yeah.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** And you lived in a time of chivalry.



**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah, that's right. That's correct. It should have never happened. It should have never happened. But I think America was complacent, too complacent, and that had something to do with it. And that happens a lot. It happened not too long ago again.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** One author wrote, and I'll ask for your reaction, he wrote, when asked who was responsible for Pearl Harbor, his sentence was short, he said, "We all were."

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Do you agree with that or disagree?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Well, I think where all Americans, we were. But being responsible for Pearl Harbor, I think it all laid right in Washington's lap.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Is there any other follow up question?

Q: When I'm talking about telling the grandson, George, with the election just being where it is today and all that, how could you, George, articulate your feeling about this country?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Today?

Q: Yes.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** After what, now?

Q: After having had the experience you had 50 years ago, and then [INDISCERNIBLE] attitudes. How could you define your pride and feeling for this country?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Oh boy. That's a toughie. These are toughies.

[TECHNICAL]

**GEORGE ASHTON:** You know, it's so nice to know that when you go outside you're safe, because you're in America, you know. But are we really safe? Look what happened on Pearl Harbor. And you know, our country has never had a war fought on its shore since the Revolution, as being damage and stuff like that. I think that has the people a little bit on the side, "We don't need all this military. We're spending too

**NPS-09-16-09**

USS AZ\_OHC\_#329\_George Ashton\_11-6-92

Transcription Date: 09/18/09 - Transcriber: JC

much money for our military and stuff like that." But you talk to people from some of these foreign countries that are over here on vacation, and they don't believe how easy we have it and how lax we are sometimes. But I don't know how to explain the question that you asked.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** Maybe rephrasing it. How do you feel about America? When you see that flag, how do you feel?

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Right there [taps heart].

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** So the feeling really has an emotional base to it, that you feel it in your heart. That's why you find it difficult to answer that question.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah.

**DANIEL MARTINEZ:** I think you answered the question.

**GEORGE ASHTON:** Yeah.

[TECHNICAL]

[END AUDIO]